

[By Gordon Dritschilo](#)

Tim McCollum returned from his most recent tour of duty in Afghanistan last year to find a new business waiting for him.

McCollum and his wife, Michelle, founded their property management business with the help of a program run through the Vermont Small Business Development Center. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., intends to take the program national and discussed that goal with McCollum and SBDC officials at a press conference Tuesday.

"We have hundreds of thousands of veterans that served in Iraq and Afghanistan," Welch said. "The challenges they face to return and integrate are enormous."

Those challenges are compounded by a difficult job market. Welch said the Vermont National Guard's Yellow Ribbon Program, which works with guard families before deployments and connects with veterans upon their return, spoke with SBDC about helping veterans start businesses.

"It's working really well," Welch said.

McCollum said he and his wife were referred to the SBDC through the Yellow Ribbon program and were shepherded through the process of putting together a business proposal — a process that included conference calls to where he was serving in Afghanistan. He said his wife, with the help of SBDC, was able to arrange for the business' equipment and accounting infrastructure to be ready to go on his return.

Chris Herriman, a business advisor at SBDC, said about 50 veterans have successfully launched small businesses through the program in the last three years.

"It has nothing to do with loans," Herriman said. "It's technical assistance and connections to resources that help them succeed."

Herriman said the SBDC looks at cash flow projections and business plans and then helps determine feasibility, arrange financing and with the licensing process.

"They do it, but we're with them every step of the way," she said.

McCollum's business, Eagle Eye Property Management, operates primarily in Killington with some summer clients on Lake Bomoseen. He said they primarily hire seasonal workers, but hope to add permanent employees in the near future.

Welch said a national roll-out of the program was included in the version of the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act that recently passed the House. Inclusion in that bill, Welch said, is a prerequisite for inclusion in a later appropriations bill. Welch said how much funding the program would get nationally is still under discussion.